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Eating to Raise Holy Sparks

(Midot HaRa'aya - "Raising Sparks," piska # 6)

"Eating in proper measure and in a holy disposition sanctifies the person and the world, and lends joy to life. Sadness induces overeating; the act of eating then takes on heaviness and expresses anger and despair. The holy sparks fall to a depth more dark than they were before, and the soul is aggrieved." (*Midot HaRa'aya, Ha'alat Nitzotzot, piska 6*)

In his collection of mussar teachings, Rav Kook addresses the ideal way in which a Jew should engage in the act of eating. Eating is a physical activity, closely tied to basic human desire and the simple need to satiate hunger. It is therefore an area that requires a distinct religious perspective—one that emphasizes spirituality and the beauty of living a transcendent life.

Rav Kook employs the language of the Kabbalists, using a term common in their discussion of food and eating: "*raising the sparks.*" While this concept carries deep and esoteric meaning, on a basic level it suggests that when one eats or drinks, one has a choice. The act can be transformed into something uplifting, meaningful, and spiritually elevating—or it can be done in a way that leads to sadness and despair.

Rav Kook reminds us of the importance of

eating in a manner that "*lifts the sparks.*" This is achieved by eating in proper measure and with a "*holy disposition.*" Although Rav Kook does not specify precisely what it means to eat in holiness, the halachic framework surrounding food offers a clear path. The blessings recited before eating and drinking, words of Torah shared during a meal, and Birkat HaMazon recited afterward all provide a sacred structure that elevates what could otherwise remain a purely physical act.

Beyond these well-known practices, there are several lesser-known halachic enactments that further sensitize a person to eat with intentionality, religious awareness, and spiritual depth.

TO'AMEAH - EREV SHABBAT EATING

There is a minhag—one that has grown more popular in recent years—known as *to'ameah*. Early sources dating back to the students of Rashi (cited in *Machzor Vitri*) teach that one should taste the food prepared for Shabbat on Friday afternoon. The Chafetz Chaim, in the *Mishnah Berurah* (Hilchot Shabbat, siman 250), describes this practice explicitly as a mitzvah.

On a basic level, tasting the food ensures that it is properly seasoned and enjoyable for Shabbat. However, Chassidic writings offer a



deeper, more spiritual dimension. One who eagerly anticipates Shabbat begins to welcome it even before its formal onset. Tasting the food becomes a symbolic *taste of Shabbat* itself.

Just as *Tachanun* is omitted at Mincha before Shabbat because the sweetness of Shabbat has already begun to permeate the day, so too does tasting Shabbat food express a yearning to absorb the sanctity of the coming holy day. The custom of *to'ameah* is thus a powerful example of eating in a meaningful way—one that uplifts the sparks embedded within the mundane aspects of life.

BIRKAT HAOREI'ACH - BLESSING THE HOST

The Talmud instructs that a guest should recite a special blessing for the host at the table. This blessing is a prayer that God shower goodness and success upon the host who has graciously opened their home. The Rambam, in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilchot Berachot, ch. 2), records a formal text for this blessing and adds that one may expand upon it in one's own words.

Pausing one's eating in order to acknowledge the kindness of the host is itself an act of spiritual elevation. It transforms the meal from a self-focused experience into one rooted in gratitude and recognition of others.

Rav Kook offers a beautiful insight on this teaching. He explains that blessing the host reminds us that we are always guests at the table of the ultimate Host in Heaven. Our sustenance, material comfort, and physical blessings are all divine gifts. Even when eating alone, a Jew can take a moment to recognize this truth, thereby infusing the act of eating with sanctity.

SACRED FRUITS OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

The blessing *Al HaMichya*, recited after eating fruits associated with the Land of Israel, includes the phrase: "*Let us eat of its fruit and be satisfied by its goodness.*" The Tur (*Orach Chaim* 208) questions whether this phrase should be

included, arguing that one should desire the Land of Israel for its spiritual value rather than its physical produce.

Rabbi Yoel Sirkis—the Bach—disagrees. In his commentary *Bayit Chadash*, he insists that the phrase should indeed be recited. When we thank God for the fruits of the Land, he explains, we are not merely appreciating their physical sweetness. The holiness of the Land itself is absorbed into its fruits. The Shechinah that permeates Eretz Yisrael is embedded within its agricultural produce.

This idea highlights a unique opportunity when eating fruits grown in the Land of Israel: to consciously recognize the spiritual nourishment and *holy sparks* contained within each fruit and vegetable.

LIFE LESSONS

- When eating at another person's table, express appreciation for their kindness and food, and offer them a heartfelt blessing.
- When consuming produce grown in the Land of Israel, pause to reflect on the unique spiritual qualities embedded within it.
- Shabbat—and even *erev Shabbat*—is a time to eat with heightened intentionality, allowing each meal to deepen our connection with one another and with the Almighty. ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, "Torah United" on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aaaron@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.

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